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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000107

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UZBEK-TAJIK TRANSPORT -- OFF THE RAILS

REF: A: 09 DUSHANBE 1364; B: DUSHANBE 052

CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, Ambassador, EXEC, DoS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A tit-for-tat over rail shipments highlights the Tajik rail system's dependence on Uzbekistan for its international transport. After Uzbekistan delayed Tajik railcars carrying construction materials for hydroelectric projects, Tajikistan responded by holding up Uzbek trains.

Tashkent upped the ante by prohibiting its trains from carrying passengers and most commercial goods across Tajikistan's northern Sughd Oblast and by delaying transit of hundreds of Tajik railcars and trucks. Both governments released all railcars and trucks by early January, but the Uzbek ban on most Uzbek rail transport through Sughd continues. Tajik officials played down the dispute, saying it stemmed from logistical, not political, problems. Foreign Minister Zarifi used this quarrel to underscore Tajikistan's intent to request funding for new Tajik transport routes that do not cross Uzbek territory at the January 28 London conference on Afghanistan. END COMMENT

¶2. (SBU) As of January 1, 2010, the Uzbek government, per decree by President Islam Karimov, prohibited shipment of passengers and goods, except for fuel and other strategic materials, across the Sughd Province of Tajikistan. The railroad through Sughd, which is surrounded by Uzbek territory on three sides, is the most direct route from Central Uzbekistan to the Ferghana Valley and Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and had been used heavily before the decree took effect. The January 1 decree requires Uzbek trains carrying non-strategic goods to make a long detour to the north, which dead ends at the Uzbek city of Angren. Goods must then be transported by road to Kokand in the Ferghana Valley and re-loaded onto the old rail line.

¶3. (C) The Uzbek decision to end shipments across Sughd follows a Tajik-Uzbek dispute over rail shipments that began in November 2009. In November, after the Tajik government began a major, nationalism-fueled campaign to build the Roghun hydroelectric dam (reflets), Uzbek officials held up 20 to 30 Tajik railcars carrying Roghun construction materials through Uzbek territory, according to an employee of Global Link transit company which ships Embassy materials by land and rail. The Tajik government responded by holding an equal number of Uzbek train cars transiting its Sughd Province. The Uzbek government then delayed transit of hundreds more Tajik railcars and trucks. National rail companies supply locomotives to transport all railcars transiting their respective territories, giving them the ability to control the movement of foreign cargo railcars.

¶4. (SBU) Deputy Head of Tajik Railways Vladimir Chetkalov said on January 21 that the problem was resolved and Uzbekistan

released all Tajik railcars and trucks. He noted that Uzbekistan hurt its own citizens and businessmen with its order to end rail transport through Sughd Oblast since shipping costs and travel times between Tashkent and the Ferghana Valley would increase for Uzbeks. "We can transport goods by rail at \$4.60 a ton. How can they transport goods that cheaply by road from Angren?" The Uzbek decision also hurts Tajik National Railways because it will no longer earn transport fees for pulling Uzbek railcars across Sughd. On the Northern Distribution Network, Chetkalov complained that the international coalition in Afghanistan has underused the Tajik rail system and not sent any materials by rail across Tajik territory to coalition forces in Afghanistan.

¶15. (SBU) At a January 18 press conference, Foreign Minister Zarifi said he would request funding for building a railroad linking Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan (at Mazar-i-Sharif) at the January 28 London Conference on Afghanistan. Zarifi said Tajikistan's unreliable rail links to its trading partners impeded progress on its economic and foreign policy priorities, such as joining the Russia/Belarus/Kazakhstan Customs Union. Zarifi declared that Tajikistan "never employed the politics of confrontation toward neighboring countries on any issues, including hydroelectric power," possibly forgetting Tajikistan's autumn 2009 threats to fill its water reservoirs during the summer rather than release water to downstream Uzbekistan for irrigation.

¶16. (C) The government has played down the political element of the railcar dispute. In a January 20 meeting with Ambassador Gross, Zarifi confirmed that Uzbekistan had released all Tajik railcars and said the problem had been "only 10% political" and

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resulted mainly from shortages of locomotives in "upstream" in Turkmenistan. However, he admitted the Uzbek government had singled out Tajik railcars carrying construction materials for Sangtuda-2 and other hydroelectric dam projects. Railways Deputy Chetkalov said the Uzbek Embassy explained the back-up as a result of a logjam up-track in Turkmenistan. Sughd Oblast Governor Qohir Rasulzoda said in an interview with Ferghana.ru, that the reason for Uzbekistan's decision to cut rail links through Sughd was Uzbekistan's opposition to Tajik hydroelectric projects, particularly Roghun.

¶17. (SBU) COMMENT: This railcar dispute is only the latest in a series of mutually destructive actions by the Uzbek and Tajik governments that hurt Tajikistan more because of its physical isolation and relatively weaker economic position. Uzbekistan's tough visa regime for Tajiks, the absence of flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe, its withdrawal from the Central Asian energy grid, and now the severing of most Uzbek rail transit through Sughd are perceived in Dushanbe as indications that Uzbekistan seeks to detach its economy and transportation system from Tajikistan while maintaining its ability to pressure Dushanbe. Since Tajikistan has decided to go all out to build Roghun, Uzbekistan can be expected to employ further tactics to prevent building materials from reaching Tajikistan. Though the Tajiks see a solution in donor-funded rail links to Afghanistan/Turkmenistan, it cannot escape its geographic bond to Uzbekistan. For its long-term economic growth, transportation links, and security, Tajikistan must come to an understanding with Tashkent on Roghun and a range of other issues. END COMMENT.

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